

To Rome with Love

Films from various countries have, for years, used what has been called an “omnibus” or anthology format, i.e., a set of short cinematic stories compiled into a feature-length film. The English did it with a famous set of horror tales (“Dead of Night”) as well as short films based on Somerset Maugham stories. The Italians, especially Vittorio de Sica, assayed it with post-war efforts like “The Gold of Naples” and “Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.” Even Americans have occasionally tried it, as in “New York Stories” (1989), where Woody Allen contributed to one of the episodes. Now Woody, as he did in “Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex* but Were Afraid to Ask” (1972), has come up with another omnibus film of his own.

In yet another European venture, Allen has, in “To Rome with Love,” provided a set of stories that are multiple but not interlinked. They mix and match American and Italian characters. In one, a sweet American girl Hayley (Alison Pill), falls for the handsome Italian Michelangelo (Flavio Parenti), they get serious, and she urges her parents Jerry and Phyllis (Woody Allen and Judy Davis) to come to Rome to meet him and his family. The in-laws meet, and Woody—an opera director—learns that the father, a mortician named Giancarlo (Fabio Armiliato), is a fabulous tenor—who can only sing in the shower!

In another segment, a triangle evolves when Jack (Jesse Eisenberg) and his sweet girlfriend Sally (Greta Gerwig), welcome her best friend Monica (Ellen Page) to their place in Rome, and Jack becomes attracted to her, a seductive actress. The threesome is really a quartet with John (Alec Baldwin), an architect revisiting his youth in the city, interjecting himself as Jesse’s constant advisor in matters of the heart.

The Italian comedian Robert Benigni appears in another vignette as a humdrum schmo who suddenly and inexplicably attains immense celebrity, with all of Italy following his every move. The other Italian sequence involves provincial newlyweds who come to Rome for a honeymoon, but whose visit is completely undone when the two mangle the time of a appointment with some important relatives. The girl Milly (Alessandra Mastronardi) gets lost in Rome only to run into a famous actor she has always admired, while the boy Antonio (Alessandro Tiberi) ends up passing off a lively prostitute Anna (Penelope Cruz) as his new wife.

As would be expected in such a miscellaneous work, some of these set-ups work better than others. Allen, back in one of his movies for the first time since “Scoop” (2006) is his usually neurotic self, but it takes some suspension of disbelief to accept him as an opera director (even of avant-garde works). The conceit of the shower-only tenor, however, is amusingly handled, especially when Armiliato (a world-class opera singer) finally gives a recital organized by Woody singing on stage—in a portable shower! Extending the gag to a fully staged performance of “Pagliacci,” however, just doesn’t work.

The triangle sequence is fitfully funny when Baldwin keeps appearing out of nowhere to offer barbs on the fickleness of women to Jesse, who, not surprisingly, sounds like a 25-year-old Woody. Yet it is hard to credit cute, pixie Page as a controlling temptress, and the intriguing Gerwig is ill-used.

For this reviewer, the Italian sequences (subtitled throughout, by the way), being less complicated, come off rather better. Benigni is very well cast as the Leopoldo, the Schlub-of-the-Month who finds the Italian media falling all over him, desperately wanting to know how he takes his toast. With a face that broadcasts naiveté and a body barely in control of itself, Benigni is amusing as the recipient of sudden, massive fame. The newlyweds story, too, though contrived, makes the best of its contrivance to get lots of laughs. It helps that the young Italian actors are attractive and sweet, and that Cruz—in a bodacious red dress which barely contains her pulchritude—is, in her way, both sweet and tangy.

There is one thing that doesn't help the coherence of "To Rome with Love." The four tales, all intercut between each other, don't make sense in time. The filmgoer, perhaps, may adjust to this, but it seems confusing when you begin to realize that some sequences take place over days or weeks, maybe even months (like the opera singer episode), while one—the newlyweds story-- happens in one day. Further, since you are seeing each tale mixed in with the others, you might assume, understandably, that they will, at some future time, coalesce—a climax which never happens. If Allen had simply told each of his four stories right in sequence (as earlier omnibus films had done) the film would be none the worse for it—and perhaps better.

"To Rome with Love" also continues Woody Allen's cinematic cook's tour of European cities over the last seven years, featuring London, Barcelona, Paris, and now Rome. Last year's love letter to the French capital, "Midnight in Paris" (see "Reviews" on this site) is matched by his valentine to the Eternal City. As in last year's film, he and his cameraman (Darius Khondji) linger over the piazzas, monuments, and neighborhoods of Rome, shooting much of it with soft light and an amber-dipped lens. For those who know the city, few major landmarks are missed--from the Baths of Caracalla to Piazza Navona. He can get caught up in the beauty of the place, as when the lost Milly is seen viewing 360 degrees around the lovely Piazza del Popolo. It may be the best part of the picture for some....

(The film is rated "R" for some sexual material; it runs 112 min.)

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